
The Most Famous Chinese Blogger and Racecar Driver You've Never Heard Of

by JEFFREY WASSERSTROM • AUG. 28, 2012

The 29-year-old Han Han is one of the most-read and consequential bloggers in China, maybe the world, so why is he so little-known in the West?



Chinese blogger Han Han attends a news conference at Hong Kong's book fair. (Reuters)

Americans today seem to know a lot more about China than they used to, as evidenced by their familiarity with more Chinese names than just Mao Zedong and Jackie Chan. Americans who have only a passing interest in China will often ask me, "What do you think of Liu Xiaobo and Ai Weiwei?" Some who have trouble with Chinese names might just ask about "that political prisoner who won the Nobel Peace Prize," "that outspoken artist the Chinese authorities keep hassling," or, now that Chen Guangcheng has spent some time in the news, "that blind lawyer who escaped from house arrest."

But here's what I keep waiting for them to ask: "How do you feel about Han Han?"

A can't-remember-the-Chinese-name variant of that question might go, "What's your take on that good-looking literary bad boy, high school drop-out, bestselling novelist, race car driver who is featured on the cover of Chinese fashion magazines and writes blog posts that often get censored by the Internet police but sometimes annoy dissidents?"

Or they might simply ask, "What do you think of *theworld's most widely read blogger?*." Though across-the-web comparisons are probably impossible, the 29-year-old Han Han's blog attracts about a million views per post and half a billion visitors so far, leading media outlets to [occasionally refer](#) to him as the world's most popular blogger.

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But Han Han is a big deal in China -- and among many China scholars and journalists in the West -- and there's no mystery as to why. He has a large and loyal following among young Chinese, something the three dissidents I listed, as admirable as they are, haven't attained. And he has consistently been at or near the center of some of the liveliest debates taking place on the Chinese Internet, the closest thing to a public sphere that exists on the mainland.

Some of Han Han's online essays, which tend to be reposted to other sites by fans eager to ensure his words won't disappear if the censors move in, offer straightforward criticisms of corrupt officials. Others lambast ultra-nationalist youths he thinks have been mindlessly lashing out against foreigners. Still others are more enigmatic. When Liu won the Nobel, for instance, Han Han just put up quotation marks with no words, suggesting that he wanted to weigh in on this subject, but knew that anything he said in support of Liu would be deleted instantly by the Internet police.

But Han has made clear that [he's no dissident](#). His trio of much-discussed 2011 posts -- devoted in turn to "revolution," "democracy," and "freedom" -- argued that China isn't heading toward a democratic revolution, nor should it. He even pokes fun at Chinese writers who seem to imagine that they could someday emulate the Czech dissident-cum-revolutionary Vaclav Havel. Ai Weiwei scoffed in response, "It would be a good piece for [state-run newspaper] *Global Times* to publish."

In yet other posts, he eschews politics completely, sometimes with comic turns that can veer

toward the juvenile. In one post, he mused on how hard it was to form an opinion of Haibao, the Gumby-like official mascot for the 2010 Shanghai Expo, when all the images of it only showed its front, leaving it impossible to know what its rear end looked like. And yet, his mid-2011 lament for the victims of last year's high-speed train crash near Wenzhou, "A Nation Derailed," scathingly criticized the government for callously disregarding safety and for refusing to admit its mistake -- two recurring themes in Han Han posts.

How is it that someone so significant and interesting remains largely unknown outside of China? It can't be because no one has written about him. Back in 2009, Simon Elegant [profiled](#) him for *Time*. In 2010, *Foreign Policy* [included](#) him in its list of 100 top global thinkers and Perry Link [celebrated](#) his "Aesopian wit" in an *International Herald Tribune* op-ed. Last year, the *New Yorker* ran an [excellent piece](#) on him by Evan Osnos cleverly titled "The Han Dynasty," and *Fast Company* [called him](#) one of the 100 most creative people in business. This year he's been the subject of an [unusually engaging](#) "Lunch with the FT" feature by David Pilling, the Asia editor of the *Financial Times*, and was discussed in Jacob Weisberg's *Slate* [essay](#) on Internet censorship in China. And so on.

One reason his global fame might trail that of other Chinese figures could be that nothing he has done has garnered international headlines of the sort that came with Ai Weiwei's arrest, Liu Xiaobo's Nobel prize, and Chen Guangcheng's escape. It's one thing for an individual to be profiled in magazines, and quite another for him or her to do something that lands them on the front page or the CNN news ticker, displayed on muted televisions at airports and in gyms. And there is something about the narrative of the brave, rebellious dissident that appeals to Western audiences in a way that an inside-the-system blogger might not.

And Han Han's writings have not been readily available in English. There've been plenty of translations of his blog posts, but typically only in outlets read by the China-obsessed.

He's shown little interest in cultivating a foreign fan base. His trips abroad have been to attend rally races rather than literary festivals, and he tends to only write about international issues when they directly affect China. While harshly critical of jingoistic nationalism, he often stresses how much he loves his country, whatever its flaws, an approach that might serve him better at home than abroad.

Maybe most significantly, Han Han is difficult to categorize, especially within the Cold War

framework we still sometimes use to view any country run by a Communist Party. People like Ai Weiwei and Chen Guangcheng can all be squeezed, albeit sometimes simplistically, into the "dissident" category. Someone like Zhang Yimou, who began as an edgy filmmaker and then segued into serving as a loyal state choreographer, could fit into the equally familiar category of sell-out. Han Han, though variously labeled as both, is neither. The young writer inhabits, and makes creative use of, the "[gray zone](#)" of authors whose political commentaries may be censored while their works of fiction are sold openly in bookstores, and who refuse to embrace any clear-cut ideology.

Han Han's rise may be most interesting for what it says about his biggest fans: China's post-1989 generation. The people to whom Han Han most appeals in China -- and maybe one day in other countries -- were typically born after or near the end of the Cold War era. They find it easier to conceptualize a writer who can sharply criticize the government in one post and then, in another, oppose revolution by arguing that revolutionary struggles may cause more sorrow than they're worth. Young Chinese don't seem bothered that Han Han can be as passionate about racing as he is about writing, can blog with equal verve about environmental protests and the frustrations of schoolwork, and seems to revel in tweaking Internet censors by using word play and jokes to hide some of his most trenchant criticisms of the establishment. And they may be intrigued by someone who often seeks the limelight, yet [claims](#) he passed up an invitation to meet with Barack Obama when the president came to Shanghai (a claim that has not been verified).

In any case, we'll soon get a chance to figure out how the various factors that have limited Han Han's global fame fit together. In October, Simon and Schuster is publishing a collection of his blog posts, fittingly titled *This Generation*.

Will Han Han ever achieve the sort of Western fame held by China's dissidents? Simon and Schuster seems to hope as much, but it's always hard to predict a Chinese writer's impact among English readers. Still, there are reasons to think that Han Han could make a splash. Not for his reputation, obviously, but for the exuberance, wit, and diversity of his essays. So, in a few months I may finally start getting more questions about Han Han. After all, his name's an easy one to pronounce.

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